

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Samuel P. Langley, January 28, 1901

January 28, 1901. PERSONA Dear Prf. Langley: —

Yor note of yesterday recd. I quite agree with you that laboratories for research are needed in Washington, and I feel quite sure that if Congress will provide a man to organize the work of research in the Government Departments — laboratories will follow as a natural consequence: For the “man” means — a “Bureau” of Research; and the Bureau — once established will lead to an extension of the facilities for research; and the extension of the facilities will involve laboratories for research.

What is needed at the present time is — to utilize the facilities for research that already exist by the appointment of a man to organize and arrange. If Congress can be induced to provide for him — all the other instrumentalities for research will follow as a natural consequence.

I want you to help me in this. My idea is to cut out from our request to Congress everything that any person could possibly object to, and ask only for that upon which all can agree. Everyone, excepting yourself, agreed to — a Bureau of Research under the Smithsonian Institution. You seemed to agree to the first point but not to the last. I have therefore cut out the Smithsonian 2 in my request, and asked only “that facilities for study and research in the Government Departments shall be afforded to scientific investigators, and to duly qualified students and graduates of institutions for higher learning in the several states and territories as well as in the District of Columbia”, &c. and that “provision shall be made for the appointment of an officer whose duty it shall be to ascertain, and make known, what facilities for research exist in the Government Departments,” &c. and make rules and regulations under which suitably qualified persons may have access to the Government

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collections for the purposes of research, &c., and direct the researches of such persons so as to make them of use to the Government and the country, as well as to themselves.

Now, I can't for the life of me see anything in this proposition that any one can possibly object to, and yet we have a valuable and important proposition worthy of being carried out by the United States Government. Enormous facilities for research exist in the Government Departments — practically unutilized because Congress has not provided machinery whereby the people of the United States may take advantage of them.

What is wanted is a MAN — (in capital letters) — who will devote his thought to the subject and evolve the necessary machinery — which will then constitute — a Bureau of Research in the Government Departments.

This Bureau has either got to be a separate and distinct organization operating in the Government Departments (which involves new legislation — a matter always difficult to initiate) or it must begin as a bud from an existing organization (an easy matter to initiate) which can afterwards be transplanted to soil of its own. So far as I am concerned I don't care which way the Bureau comes into existence, so long as it IS brought into existence. Whether it is propagated by seed or by cutting is immaterial:— But, it will be more difficult to get the seed than the cutting.

The only existing organization that could start — as a bud — a Bureau of Research operating in the Government Departments, is — in my opinion — the Smithsonian Institution. If the Smithsonian Institution is not prepared to throw off a bud of this description, I want it to help to plant the seed. I do not desire to force upon your shoulders a burden you do not wish to assume, and therefore start out to ask Congress for the necessary machinery to utilize the Departments of the Government for the purposes of research, quite independently of the Smithsonian Institution. The Resolution passed by the Board of Regents will be of great assistance, and I write now to ask you — not only as 4

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a scientific man, but as the executive officer of the Smithsonian Institution,—to help me in getting this matter through Congress.

I want the Smithsonian to take the LEAD in telling Congress what to do. It now has the opportunity of initiating a great movement for the “increase and diffusion of knowledge among men”. The opinion of the Board of Regents will undoubtedly have great influence in Congress and in the country at large — and with your hearty co-operation and good will I feel sure that something in the right direction will be done by Congress.

I want you to help — nay more — I want you to take the LEAD in this matter. You may not want to go as far as I am prepared to follow, but if you will only make one step, I will stand beside you and not go any further. Whereas, if you leave me alone nobody knows how far I may go! Neither you nor the Smithsonian can afford to stand still — you must advance — — — or be left behind. If you are prepared to advance one step in the direction of a Government Bureau of Research — it will undoubtedly be a good step that no one can object to — and I would be willing to take that step and ?halt halt to see what will result — restraining my impatience for the end desired, until we can see how that step works.

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Now, my dear Prof. Langley, I have determined to use my best efforts to push Congress to do something in this direction. I do not want to be left alone without the benefit of your restraining influence. I feel quite sure — away down in my heart — that you are interested in this whole matter, and I therefore urge you to stand back no longer, but come forward and take the lead.

We have had no free talk upon this subject. You have not been present at the various meetings at my house to discuss the matter. You have seemed to be out of sympathy with the whole movement — largely, I think, because you did not wish to have such a Bureau of Research “under the direction of the Smithsonian Institution”.

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Now, the Bureau of Research is the main thing, and it is quite immaterial whether it is placed under the Smithsonian or not, so long as it comes into existence. If you approve of a Bureau of Research — SAY SO; and if you don't want it under the Smithsonian Institution say how you would wish it to come into existence. Take the lead and give us the benefit of some specific recommendation that we can follow. We want your sympathy and we want your aid.

Yours sincerely, Alexander Graham Bell